



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

COUNTRY UPDATE: VIETNAM

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USCIRF's Mission

To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.

Religious Freedom Conditions in Vietnam in 2023

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Overview

In May 2023, USCIRF Vice Chair Frederick Davie and Commissioner Eric Ueland traveled with staff to Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, to meet with government officials, religious communities, and other civil society representatives to discuss religious freedom concerns. This delegation represented USCIRF's first trip to the country since 2019. The trip confirmed USCIRF's ongoing assessment that while the last decade has witnessed increased opportunities for religious communities throughout Vietnam, the country's broader human rights situation remains dire, and in recent years religious freedom conditions in particular have declined.

This country update summarizes the key conclusions from USCIRF's visit. While in country, the USCIRF delegation received a warm welcome from government officials who invited a frank exchange of views, as testament to the deepening relationship between the United States and Vietnam. USCIRF consistently reiterated to these officials that Vietnam must respect its obligations to guarantee religious freedom as identified in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Despite the constructive tone of those meetings, Vietnamese authorities consistently monitored and followed the USCIRF delegation throughout its five days in country.

Furthermore, USCIRF Commissioners heard from multiple representatives of various faith communities that systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of freedom of religion and belief have persisted throughout Vietnam. Enforcement of the [2018 Law on Belief and Religion](#) remains restrictive in nature, and it has been plagued by uneven and inconsistent application throughout the country. In particular, religious groups experience relatively greater freedom in urban areas, regardless of their registration or recognition status, while serious challenges are pervasive in many rural areas. Government persecution remains a harsh reality for unregistered independent religious groups, many of which officials designate as "strange, false, or heretical" religions. This repression is particularly salient for members of religious minority communities whose identity overlaps with their ethnicity; local authorities often single out these members in efforts to force them to renounce their faith.



Background

Vietnam’s Legal Framework and Religious Landscape

Vietnam’s [constitution](#) states that citizens “can follow any religion or follow none” and “all religions are equal before the law”; it also mandates respect and protection for freedom of belief and religion. However, government authorities continue to closely monitor all religious activity, often harassing, detaining, or otherwise preventing unregistered faith communities from exercising their fundamental right to religious freedom. The government maintains state-sponsored alternatives to many independent religious communities and pressures members of these independent groups, including their religious leaders, to join state organizations. Vietnam’s Government Committee for Religious Affairs released a “white book” on religious policies in March 2023—its first such document in 16 years—to detail the state of religious communities within Vietnam, as well as governmental attitudes and current laws on religious freedom. However, [reports](#) from independent religious groups indicate that this document fails to reflect the government’s persistent violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB)—but that it instead demonstrates the country’s similar trajectory to China in terms of its regulation and control of religion.

In all government meetings during USCIRF’s visit to Vietnam, officials noted the religious [diversity](#) of their country as a national asset; according to them, around 90 percent of the population practices some sort of religious or spiritual belief, including the single largest group of

some 27 percent which identifies as Buddhist. Vietnam also hosts Southeast Asia’s second largest Roman Catholic population of around 7 million people. As of August 2023, the country was home to 46 registered faith groups and 16 recognized religions—a number of which USCIRF met with during its country visit. USCIRF also met with representatives of several unregistered communities. Throughout these conversations, and consistent with its longstanding reporting on Vietnam, USCIRF observed that the mandatory nature of the country’s registration process, as well as official enforcement of the 2018 Law in general, stands in contrast to the government’s obligation to provide religious freedom to all its people.

Implementation of the 2018 Law on Belief and Religion

During the May visit, Vietnamese officials reiterated to USCIRF the government’s commitment to uphold religious freedom as reflected through both its own constitution and obligations to international treaties. They further communicated that the government is still in the process of reviewing the law and drafting two implementing decrees. However, they did not share the details of this review or drafting process when pressed to do so. They also did not confirm whether the review or drafting process included consideration of [recommendations](#) from Vietnam’s 2019 Universal Periodic Review at the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council.

Throughout its trip, USCIRF observed that the 2018 Law on Belief and Religion as enforced in practice contributes to ongoing and systematic violations of religious freedom while fostering social distrust and instability. The language of the law and the government's enforcement of it produce a managerial approach, effectively exploiting a legal pathway for the government to interfere in and direct religious organizations. It prevents faith groups from fully contributing to the social and economic development of their local communities, and its enforcement furthers institutional challenges to Vietnam's ability to govern—as evident in the ability of local officials in rural areas to violate religious freedom with impunity. This haphazard implementation of the 2018 Law exposes three fundamental flaws in Vietnam's regulation of religious affairs: continued disregard for international standards of religious freedom, institutionalization of distrust of independent religious communities, and a lack of official transparency.

Despite these issues, every religious community that USCIRF met with during its country visit stressed their willingness to build bridges with the authorities and contribute to local and national development. Additionally, nearly every such community expressed a specific desire to register and follow the law, if the government would invite them to do so. However, deep distrust remains among nearly all religious groups over the potential for official intervention to pressure them to choose religious leaders and interpret sacred texts in ways that the state would deem ideologically acceptable.

Continued Disregard for International Standards:

As USCIRF noted in its 2019 Legislation [Factsheet](#) on Registration Laws, the UDHR and ICCPR provide that FoRB includes the right to engage in community religious activities. A given government can only require registration to confer legal personality and must not make the process compulsory to allow religious practice. Furthermore, as the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief [noted](#) in 2011, for registration laws to comply with international standards of religious freedom, they must be quick, transparent, fair, non-discriminatory, and not onerous or invasive.

Consistent with its [assessment](#) following its 2019 visit to Vietnam, USCIRF continues to conclude that the 2018 Law on Belief and Religion—both as written and implemented—contravenes international human rights standards. Through this law, religious communities must register all activities for the coming year for government

approval, even if the community is unregistered, and such approval can take over a month. Without it, authorities claim justification to interrupt or prevent their activities. The government further mandates each religious community to register with the Committee for Religious Affairs after five years of operation, which grants it legal personality. Following registration, a religious organization can then further apply for official “recognition.” There can be multiple, officially recognized religious groups for the same religion; for example, Vietnam [recognizes](#) seven Islamic religious organizations.

In October 2022, five UN Special Rapporteurs, including one on FoRB, [noted](#) that Vietnamese authorities continued to claim the right to approve or refuse registration requests from religious groups, or to systematically deny or exceedingly delay registration, while resorting to the protection of national security and social unity as a justification. Testimony from religious communities with whom USCIRF met during its visit confirmed the continuing relevance of this observation.

Institutional Distrust of Independent Organizations

Religious communities have reported to USCIRF that the 2018 Law serves to institutionalize distrust between state and society in Vietnam. Alongside a wider [crackdown](#) on independent civil society, the government has regularly used the 2018 Law as an instrument to extend this crackdown to independent religious groups while attempting to force them to embrace state-sponsored alternatives. For example, the government sponsors the Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha as the official alternative to the independent United Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV). The UBCV reported that its followers and leaders face consistent pressure from state officials to join the Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha through measures that include harassing followers, preventing access to UBCV houses of worship, and sealing monks inside temples. Pressure to leave an independent faith community for a state-sponsored alternative is a violation of religious freedom.

Many independent Buddhist communities have shared that their concerns over such political pressure have convinced them of the need to preserve their independence from state-sponsored alternatives. In fact, many members of state-sponsored religious groups officially belong to the Communist Party, and some have even been elected to the National Assembly—contrary to what all unregistered Buddhist religious communities with whom USCIRF met expressed as a core religious conviction to remain outside of politics.

A variety of groups, including Buddhists and Christians, shared that this distrust between the Vietnamese government and independent religious communities may represent a legacy of the Vietnam War era. They felt that the Communist-led government has made insufficient effort to build trust with minority religious communities despite their commitment to national sovereignty. Multiple unregistered groups have reported that reviewing officials often reject applications for fear of blame in case the applying religious organization ever runs afoul of the law or government.

Lack of Transparency

Some unregistered communities whose applications the government denied reported a lack of feedback from authorities, despite their requests for an explanation of the rejection. Some groups specifically requested a template of a successful application in order to fully comply with the official requirements, but they received no response. In more than one reported instance, when an unregistered group asked for such feedback, authorities demanded the names and addresses of adherents for a group to register, without providing any clear indication whether such details were required for approval.

Without registration, religious groups are unable to publicly mark their houses of worship or to proselytize, and authorities often closely surveil their activities. Some unregistered groups shared that plainclothes security officials would attend their services and gatherings to observe their practices. However, most unregistered faith communities also reported that they have been able to build more productive relationships with local authorities in recent years, thereby helping to prevent excessive disruptions to their activities.

Intersecting Issues for Ethnic and Religious Minorities

Vietnamese local authorities have continued to harass or outright persecute unregistered independent religious communities, particularly among minority groups. Targeted groups include ethnic Hmong and Montagnard Christians, Hoa Hao Buddhists, Unified Buddhists, Cao Dai followers, Catholics, and adherents of new religious movements such as the [Ha Mon religion](#), Falun Gong, Duong Van Minh, World Mission Society Church of God, and others. The Vietnamese government has [designated](#) many of these independent religious groups as “false,” “strange,” or “heretical” religions, or otherwise

referred to them as “cults.” Authorities have cynically [linked](#) their portrayal of certain communities as “evil cults” with what they call “hostile and reactionary forces” whose purpose they claim is to oppose the constitution, law, and government of Vietnam. During its visit, USCIRF received reports of Vietnamese authorities using violence and other means to coerce followers of the Duong Van Minh into signing documents renouncing their faith.

Urban-Rural Divide Exacerbates Religious Freedom Issues

Regardless of their registration status, multiple religious communities consistently told USCIRF during its visit that large urban areas provide ample space for religious groups to practice their activities and to assemble. When asked for the likely reasons, religious representatives gave two. First, they suggested officials in urban areas tend to be better educated and have had more exposure to different cultures and religions, and thus they are less likely to perceive religious differences or independent activities as threats to social stability or government authority. Second, they suggested that authorities in local and especially remote communities have received insufficient instruction on current laws and procedures, and they tend to manifest their personal biases and prejudices against religious communities without oversight from the central government. These trends are unfortunately consistent with observations from USCIRF’s 2019 country visit and subsequent reporting—and they appear to have worsened, along with strict surveillance and other official pressures on religious and ethnic minorities in such areas.

Central Highlands

Ethnic and Christian minority communities continue to face particularly difficult challenges in Vietnam’s remote Central and Northern Highlands. Some groups that USCIRF met during its country visit claimed that in these areas, where ethnic and religious minorities such as Hmong and Montagnard reside, local and central authorities directly coordinate the persecution of faith communities and/or hinder their religious activities. For example, religious communities have expressed concern to USCIRF that the government is using recent, [deplorable](#) incidents of [political violence](#) in the Central Highlands as a pretext to [justify](#) and expand a crackdown on human rights in the area, including on freedom of religion and belief. Vietnamese authorities have long [restricted](#) access to the region and the predominantly

Christian Montagnard population in Dak Lak and historically [refused](#) to acknowledge the religious discrimination and persecution that those communities and their religious freedom advocates face in the region. The government of Vietnam has also sought the return of several individuals associated with the advocacy group Montagnard Stand for Justice who are seeking protection in Thailand. In recent years, the governments of Thailand and Cambodia have [coordinated](#) with Vietnamese officials to track perceived dissidents, including human rights and religious activists, and return them to Vietnam.

Religious Prisoners of Conscience

USCIRF maintains the [Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List](#), which identifies victims of certain forms of religious persecution, including religious prisoners of conscience. It includes Danh Minh Quang and Thach Cuong, two Khmer Krom Buddhists with whom USCIRF met during its country visit; in July, Vietnamese authorities detained them on charges of violating Article 331 of the Vietnam Criminal Code, which vaguely criminalizes the “abuse” of basic freedoms such as speech, press, religion, and association. In August, authorities detained To Hoang Chuong under the same charges, accusing all three individuals of promoting indigenous rights through events celebrating international treaties such as the UDHR and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), including by distributing the UNDRIP in the Khmer language. The persistence of such questionable detentions remains one of Vietnam’s most concerning trends regarding its recent decline in religious freedom conditions.

Property Rights

Private property does not legally exist under Communist rule in Vietnam. Access to houses of worship and other religious centers, including schools, has remained a persistent problem for unregistered, registered, and even recognized religious communities in both urban and rural areas. For example, some recognized religious groups reported to USCIRF that in order to build a new religious center, they are required to first buy a property, then give it to the government, and then receive it back from the authorities who grant them permission to construct on that property. Religious communities from the country’s south, regardless of registration status, have additionally noted that the government of Vietnam [confiscated](#) a number of schools and religious centers following reunification in 1975, including houses of worship, which it has never returned. Some of

these properties remain vacant and unused to this day. Unregistered, registered, and recognized religious groups all reported the government’s reluctance to return such property as well as its longstanding policy to hinder the acquisition and development of any new property. They reported this policy as a barrier to assembling and practicing their religious activities, even as it has limited their ability to fully contribute to the economic and social development of their wider communities.

U.S. Policy

In November 2022, pursuant to the [International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 \(IRFA\)](#), as amended, the U.S. Department of State placed Vietnam on its Special Watch List (SWL) of countries in which the government commits or tolerates severe religious freedom violations. This inclusion represented the first such designation for Vietnam since the State Department lifted the country’s Country of Particular Concern (CPC) designation in 2006. In its 2023 Annual Report chapter on Vietnam, USCIRF recommended Vietnam’s designation as a CPC for systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom.

In April 2023, the Biden administration [celebrated](#) 28 years of diplomatic relations and 10 years of Comprehensive Partnership with Vietnam, noting human rights, among other issues, were a feature in the growing relationship between the two countries. In recent years, the two countries have increased cooperation on security concerns, particularly in the South China Sea in addressing climate change. In the United Nations Human Rights Council, Vietnam has been a strong voice and partner for promoting thematic human rights issues such as anti-discrimination. Through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) programs, the United States has [promoted](#) STEM educational opportunities for Vietnamese students and [funding](#) to increase the business environment and private sector. These and other areas of engagement have enabled the United States and Vietnam to develop deeper ties. Reports [indicate](#) President Biden will in September sign a strategic partnership agreement with Vietnam.

In the area of human rights, however, there is room for further engagement. Each fall, the United States and Vietnam engage in a human rights dialogue, which includes raising issues of religious freedom. While [notes](#) from previous dialogues have been made public, notes from the [2022 dialogue](#) were not. Greater commitment and transparency are needed from Vietnam to advance



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cooperation on human rights. Even as the partnership deepens, Vietnam has prevented some U.S. attempts to meet victims of human rights abuses. For example, in February 2023, local authorities in Southern Vietnam [*prevented*](#) U.S. diplomats from meeting with ethnic and religious minorities in Dak Lak province.

Conclusion

USCIRF acknowledges the efforts by the Vietnamese government, in partnership with the U.S. government and civil society actors, to improve religious freedom conditions in that country. Since the signing of the binding agreement between the two countries in 2005 that led to the lifting of the CPC designation in 2006, the government of Vietnam has created more space in some areas for individuals and religious communities to exercise

their religion or belief freely, openly, and without fear. However, the recent crackdown on civil society, increased pressure on independent religious communities, alarming reports of forced renunciations of faith, and other growing religious freedom violations add up to a clear reversal in that once-positive trajectory.

At the time of this writing, Vietnam has reportedly been in the process of revising its 2018 Law on Belief and Religion as well as drafting two implementing decrees. USCIRF urges the U.S. government to continue to engage with the Vietnamese government to use those processes to meaningfully reform its laws and practices related to FoRB, to better strengthen both its human rights conditions and the crucial U.S.-Vietnam relationship.

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